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### **Testimony regarding SB 126 An Act Concerning an Internship Program for Adults with Autism February 24, 2016**

Senator Gerratana, Rep. Ritter, and members of the Public Health Committee:

I am an autistic adult. While I am clearly sympathetic to the goal of SB 126 to enable autistic adults to gain meaningful employment, my remarks here concern the unfortunate use of language that is disfavored—often emphatically rejected—by most of the autistic self-advocacy community. I refer to the use of the words “with autism.” Many of you may believe that person-first language (PFL) is the only correct way to refer to disabled people, not realizing that PFL is becoming increasingly controversial. Increasingly, significant segments of the disability community are embracing what has come to be known as identity-first language (IFL), which is more like plain English than PFL’s wordy awkwardness.

For example, I am also Jewish. It would be absurd—probably even antisemitic—to call me a “person with Jewishness,” thus suggesting one could separate my Jewish identity from my essential self. Or think of how offended a gay person would feel being called a “person with gayness” as if his sexual orientation was something apart, something to be “cured.” Standard English puts identity as an adjective before any noun, or the identity is contained in the noun itself. The correct usage here would be “autistics” or “autistic people,” or in the specific case of SB 126, “autistic adults.” Using “with autism” when most autistics reject such language as unnaturally separating us from our essential selves demeans autistic people, even if it is not done intentionally. It wrongly suggests that autism is like a decayed tooth to be removed, rather than a difference to be accepted and even embraced.

It is important to understand that what autistics desire is often very different from what family members and professionals are promoting. Autistic self-advocates strongly oppose the puzzle piece motif of the parent/professional community. As a sweatshirt I have reads with a puzzle piece crossed out, “I am not a puzzle; I am a person.” We autistics do not appreciate Autism \$peaks pity, childlike puzzle piece (as if autistics are perpetual children who never mature into adulthood), Light It Up Blue and MSSNG campaigns (as if autistics are missing something), autism plague rhetoric, and promotion of research leading to prenatal genetic screening to selectively abort our kind. The fact that Autism \$peaks does not have a single autistic person on their board of directors is most telling. (The cashtag “Autism \$peaks” is widely used by that organization’s autistic critics, particularly on Twitter where it is easily searchable.) The disability rights slogan, “Nothing About Us Without Us” applies to autistic issues as much as any other disability issue.

Lydia Brown has a very good essay on identity-first language on the website of the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network, which has become one of the nation's most effective disability rights organizations: <http://autisticadvocacy.org/home/about-asan/identity-first-language/> Here is how she frames the PFL versus IFL debate:

When we say "person with autism," we say that it is unfortunate and an accident that a person is Autistic. We affirm that the person has value and worth, and that autism is entirely separate from what gives him or her value and worth. In fact, we are saying that autism is detrimental to value and worth as a person, which is why we separate the condition with the word "with" or "has." Ultimately, what we are saying when we say "person with autism" is that the person would be better off if not Autistic, and that it would have been better if he or she had been born typical. We suppress the individual's identity as an Autistic person because we are saying that autism is something inherently bad like a disease.

Yet, when we say "Autistic person," we recognize, affirm, and validate an individual's identity as an Autistic person. We recognize the value and worth of that individual as an Autistic person — that being Autistic is not a condition absolutely irreconcilable with regarding people as inherently valuable and worth something. We affirm the individual's potential to grow and mature, to overcome challenges and disability, and to live a meaningful life as *an Autistic*. Ultimately, we are accepting that the individual is different from non-Autistic people—and that that's not a tragedy, and we are showing that we are not afraid or ashamed to recognize that difference.

I understand and respect the desire of particular sub-communities of the larger disability community, such as the I/DD community, for PFL. That respect ought to be mutual, and the autistic, Deaf, and blind communities' preferences for IFL should also be respected.

I would therefore request that if you decide to move forward with SB 126 (understanding current budgetary considerations), that the language be changed from "adults with autism" to "autistic adults," and that you do likewise in any and all future legislation regarding autistic people.